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EARLY LATIA

by

RUTH ELLIS MESSEN

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Editor

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PRAISE
VIRGIN IN
LATIN HYMNS

by

MESSENGER, PH.D.

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The Praise of the Virgin in Early Latin Hymns

There never was a time in the history of the Christian Church when the hearts of the people were not raised to heaven in song. At first in Palestine, then in Greek-speaking lands, might have been heard the never-ceasing pæans, which day by day gave expression to the loyalty and religious fervor of primitive Christianity. Attractive as the study of the Eastern hymns may be, the main stream of Christian hymnology did not flow in that direction but was diverted to western channels as the center of Christian thought and influence shifted to the Latin-speaking world. Here in Italy, Spain and Gaul, the first writers of the great Latin hymns appeared. Originating in the fourth century, the collections increased in number, variety and usage, until the ninth century possessed the full cycle of hymns which had been made a part of the formal services of the Church, a cycle which was destined to survive for centuries as the nucleus of Catholic hymnals up to the present day.

One of the most convenient printed collections of this group of hymns which is available to-day is that of the late A. S. Walpole, an English hymnologist. It contains 129 hymns which appear in the service books of the early mediæval monasteries, since monastic rites established in the sixth century were the means by which the early hymns in general use were selected, conserved and augmented for the future benefit of the Church. The Walpole edition of *Early Latin Hymns* has, therefore, been chosen to provide the hymns which are now to be considered.¹

When the early fathers of Christianity contemplated the life and mission of our Lord, their thoughts were naturally centered upon his nativity, crucifixion and resurrection. In hymns the narrative element became prominent, the desire to tell a story in simple and objective form. To-day our Christian hymns are characterized by a subjective element and by the expression of social ideals which a modern age has exalted.

¹ A. S. Walpole, *Early Latin Hymns* (Cambridge, 1922).

In the early centuries, however, the three immortal themes of the nativity, crucifixion and resurrection were paramount in hymnology. The first of these called to mind the Virgin Mother. Every hymn, therefore, which recounts the chief events in the life of Jesus, or more particularly the incidents connected with his birth, is redolent with her praise. The poems of Saint Ambrose, the great bishop of Milan, offer an excellent illustration of her veneration in fourth century hymns. "Come, Thou Redeemer of the world, show forth the virgin birth. Every age marvels; such a birth befits our God." Continuing, Saint Ambrose proclaims that the word of God is made flesh by the power of the Holy Spirit, and that the inviolate purity of the Virgin is the sign of the presence of God within her, just as a flag over some royal palace might signify the presence of the prince.² A second hymn by the same writer, which commemorates the crucifixion of Jesus, includes mention of that incident where the Son commends his mother to the care of Saint John. Saint Ambrose thinks of her simply as the Virgin Mother, with no hint of that later theme which was destined to grow out of the same scene and develop into the praises of the *Mater Dolorosa* standing by the cross.³

In a third hymn, upon the Epiphany theme, Saint Ambrose says that "the star, shining in the heavens, pointed out the virgin birth."⁴ Here and in the preceding citation we have but a passing reference. Saint Ambrose has another treasure to offer, "Jesus, Thou crown of virgins, whom that mother brought forth, who was the only Virgin thus to bear a child, mercifully receive these vows." The hymn is a counterpart in poetical form of his *De Virginibus*, a prose work addressed to his sister Marcellina. Dedication to the ascetic life on the part of holy virgins was becoming a common practice in his day. He, therefore, advocated it for his sister, exalting both in essay and hymn the Virgin Mother as the inspiration to the virgin life.⁵

There are at least two implications in the use made by Saint Ambrose of the Virgin theme, which are intensely interesting to the student of early Christian thought. The former

² *Intende qui regis Israel*, stanzas 2, 3, 4.

³ *Iam surgit hora tertia*, stanzas 5, 6.

⁴ *Inluminans altissimus*, stanza 3.

⁵ *Jesu, corona virginum*, especially stanza 1.

is the direct reflection of the veneration of the Virgin Mary which began to be so prominent in the fourth century, in the exact forms which it took in expressions of devotion outside of hymnology. The personages of the New Testament narrative, who surrounded our Lord during his lifetime, were for the most part honored with a martyr's crown. Not so the Virgin Mother. Consequently the veneration, offered by the early Church to the great martyr founders, overshadowed the honors given to those saints of whom such a sacrifice was not demanded. Slowly the claims to virtue displayed in a consecrated life, as well as a consecrated death, began to be recognized by the Church, which added to the martyr group the ascetic group, as objects of veneration. With the latter, the Virgin came into her inheritance of devotion. It was during the fourth century, also, that the Nicene Creed crystallized orthodox belief. The definition by the Council of Nicæa, 325 A.D., of the Godhead of the Son was to a degree paralleled by a corresponding recognition of his mother. This was achieved, 431 A.D., at the Council of Ephesus, when the Nestorian controversy resulted in the official sanction of the term "Mother of God," as applied to the Virgin. In fact, those who denied her the appellation were declared heretical.⁶ No wonder that orthodox hymn writers tried to express their idea of the purity requisite to such a mother, and at the same time endeavored to uphold her as the inspiration of the ascetic life.⁷

The second characteristic of the Ambrosian hymns, which calls for notice, is the absence of pagan ideas in references to the Virgin. There are those who would seek for the origin of many elements of Christian belief and worship in aspects of Greek, Roman and oriental cults. Saint Ambrose, of course, shared the thought of his time. Indeed, he was a leading agent in assimilating the best of the ethical ideals of paganism

⁶ For the Council of Ephesus, *vide* Article *Ephesus, IV, Lexicon für Theologie und Kirche*, 2nd Ed. (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1931); G. Krüger, *Handbuch der Kirchengeschichte* (Tübingen, 1923), I, p. 171; F. J. Foakes Jackson, *History of the Christian Church from the Earliest Times to 461* (Cambridge, 1914), p. 458 *et seq.*

The Abbé Duchesne has explained the precise meaning of the expression, "Mother of God," thus: "*L'expression 'Mère de Dieu' n'est orthodoxe que si on l'entend de Dieu-personne; entendue de Dieu-nature elle est plus qu'heretique, elle est absurde. Marie, selon la tradition orthodoxe, est mère de quelqu'un qui est Dieu; elle est sa mère, non qu'il lui doive sa divinité, mais parce qu'il a pris d'elle son humanité.*" L. Duchesne, *Histoire ancienne de l'Eglise*, III (Paris, 1910), p. 325.

⁷ *Vide* J. P. Kirsch, *Doctrine of the Communion of Saints* (Edinburgh, 1910), p. 236 *et seq.*

to Christian theology. Other hymns of his are reminiscent of pre-Christian ideas. Aurora, for instance, is still the dawn.⁸

A throng of demon powers infest the night time and are dispersed by the crowing cock.⁹ But all that is said by Saint Ambrose about the Virgin is strictly biblical in its derivation.

Other writers of the fourth century are no less ardent than he in their expression of the Virgin's supremacy. One tells of Gabriel's message (perhaps it was Hilary of Poitiers), and adds, "We are taught to believe a new marvel, not seen before, a Virgin Mother."¹⁰ Prudentius, the noted Christian poet of Spain, enters into the full spirit of the theme. He produced two important works, the *Cathemerinon*, a collection of twelve sacred poems for daily private devotion, and the *Peristephanon*, containing fourteen poems honoring certain martyrs, for a similar purpose. In the former work, as he narrates the story of the life of Jesus, he declares that the Virgin "has given birth to our salvation" and reminds the worshiper that her Son is the "Redeemer of the world."¹¹ In true harmony with all Christians of his day he must needs exalt the mother with the Son. Again, he says, "O Nazarene, light of Bethlehem, word of the Father, born of a Virgin," choosing his phrases with the same significance.¹²

A Nativity hymn by Sedulius, however, is perhaps the best known of all fourth-century verses on this subject. "From the place of sunrise" was sometimes divided into two parts, the first seven stanzas being used at Nativity. Translated and retranslated, it has served the Church for centuries. The first stanza contains the phrase, "born of the Virgin Mary," the third portrays her as the recipient of celestial grace, while the fourth declares that "the dwelling-place of her pure breast is suddenly made the temple of God."¹³

Virgin hymns suggest the Virgin feasts. For information regarding the festivals of this early period we must once more

⁸ *Splendor paternae glorie*, stanza 8.

⁹ *Aeterne rerum conditor*, stanza 3.

¹⁰ *Hymnum dicat turba fratrum*, lines 11-13.

¹¹ *Corde natus ex parentis*, stanza 4.

¹² *O Nazarene, lux Bethlem*, lines 1, 2.

For an account of Prudentius, *vide* F. J. E. Raby, *A History of Christian Latin Poetry* (Oxford, 1927).

¹³ *A solis ortus cardine*.

turn our thoughts to the east, where in Jerusalem the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple is first noted in the second half of the fourth century. Later the name, Purification of the Blessed Virgin, was used for the same feast in the west. We first hear of the Feast of the Annunciation early in the seventh century and, at the same period, that of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin and the *Dormitio* or *Falling Asleep*, in commemoration of her death. The name *Transitus Mariae* is also used for the same feast to which legend in the fourth century, probably from Syria, had added the story of her translation to heaven. Up to the fifteenth century these names were still in use, but in modern times the name Assumption has been exclusively employed.¹⁴ All the above festivals were unknown in Rome before the seventh century, although, as in the case of the *Dormitio*, they had flourished earlier in the Byzantine Church. At the beginning of the eighth century they are recorded in the Gelasian Sacramentary, showing that they had found meanwhile a place in the favor of the Western Church. Indeed, they were destined to be included among her choice possessions.¹⁵

One reason for the increased interest in the Virgin feasts, from the fourth century on, was undoubtedly the New Testament apocryphal literature which narrated the story of the Virgin's life, filling in many gaps left by the canonical accounts.¹⁶ It is now easier to understand why the Latin hymns of the fourth century, which were written before the new influences had had time to be felt, tell only the simple narrative of the life of Jesus and contain merely the reflection of the Virgin's praise in its earliest form.

The hymns of Venantius Fortunatus, bishop of Poitiers, are the next great compositions to be considered, appearing in the sixth century in Gaul. His magnificent hymn for the Holy Cross, "Sing, my tongue, the glorious battle," is so well known that one has only to remind the reader that the ancient themes of the virgin birth and the Virgin Mother occur in its fourth and fifth stanzas.¹⁷ Fortunatus wrote a Christmas hymn also.

¹⁴ G. Krüger, *Handbuch der Kirchengeschichte*, III, pp. 221, 238. F. Cabrol, "Assomption (Fête de l')" in *Dictionnaire d'Archéologie chrétienne et de Liturgie*.

¹⁵ *Vide* L. Duchesne, *Christian Worship* (London, 1904), pp. 271-273.

¹⁶ P. E. Lucius, *Die Anfänge des Heiligenkults* (Tübingen, 1904), p. 422.

¹⁷ *Pange lingua, gloriosi proelium certaminis*.

Phrases rendered familiar by later usage are gathered here. The prophecy of Isaiah, the annunciation, the work of the Spirit, a mighty power filling all the universe yet submitting to the restrictions of an infant's life, the rod of Jesse and the concept of One who with his Father created the heavens, wearing swaddling clothes under a mother's care, all appear. The final stanza brings the virgin theme to a climax: "Now is light and salvation born. Night has been driven away and death has been conquered. Come, ye tribes, believe! Mary has brought forth God."¹⁸

One of the first Latin hymns to be devoted to the exclusive praise of the Virgin is also attributed to Fortunatus. The poet has permitted himself a wider range of tributes than in any previous hymn. Terms such as *beata*, *benedicta* and *gloriosa* are found. The contrast between the parts played by Eve and Mary in the drama of man's salvation, a favorite idea with later mediæval writers, is made clear. The Virgin is, moreover, called "the window of heaven," "the doorway for the king," "the gate of light."¹⁹ It seems remarkable that a hymn of the sixth century should reveal so complete an assimilation of the ideas of Eastern Christianity, even before the Virgin feasts had reached Rome. If, however, Fortunatus is in reality the author, it may illustrate the Gallic tendency toward earlier adoption of ideas prevailing in those lands in which our Christian religion arose. Much has yet to be revealed in the history of Gallic Latin hymns; but whatever stands out from the general obscurity, which surrounds their development, points to an earlier and more varied use of song in the services of worship, and an interest in devotional poetry which surpassed that of Italy, with the possible exception of Milan.

Like the fourth century, the sixth and later the ninth centuries were notable periods in the growth of Latin hymnology. In the great hymn cycles, which were used chiefly in the services of the canonical hours, those terms are met continually

¹⁸ *Agnoscat omne saeculum*. Fortunatus, one of the most interesting literary figures of the sixth century, is the author of secular as well as religious verse. In addition to Raby's account in his *History of Christian Latin Poetry*, a very suggestive and stimulating criticism of the man and his work is available in P. S. Allen, *Romanesque Lyric* (Un. of N. Carolina Press, 1928).

¹⁹ *Quem terra, pontus, aethera*.

which have become familiar in the praises of the mother of the Lord. The greater number of references are to the virgin birth, and the purity and fame of the Virgin Mother. Yet the praises of the Son which glorify the mother are present also, and that metaphor by which she is termed "the gate accessible to Christ."²⁰

The ninth century cycle of monastic hymns did not include a well-loved poem which undoubtedly dates from that century, "Hail, Star of the Sea." It forms the link which connects the group of earlier hymns with those of a later period when the praises of the Virgin reached their climax in Latin song.

*Ave, maris stella,
Dei mater alma
Atque semper virgo,
Felix coeli porta.*

*Monstra te esse matrem,
Sumat per te precem,
Qui pro nobis natus
Tulit esse tuus.*

*Sumens illud Ave
Gabrielis ore,
Funda nos in pace,
Mutans nomen Evae.*

*Virgo singularis,
Inter omnes mitis,
Nos culpis solutos
Mites fac et castos.*

*Solve vincla reis,
Profer lumen caecis,
Mala nostra pelle,
Bona cuncta posce.*

*Vitam praesta puram,
Iter para tutum,
Ut videntes Iesum
Semper collaetemur.*

*Sit laus Deo patri,
Summum Christo decus,
Spiritui sancto,
Honor, tribus unus.²¹*

The literary beauty and devotional spirit of this hymn are accessible to all in many translations. The following is one of two, recently selected by Father Britt for his *Hymns of the Breviary and Missal*.²² It is here printed by the courtesy of the author, Rev. George R. Woodward, M.A.

²⁰ *Aeterna caeli gloria*, stanza 1; *Conditor alme siderum*, line 12; *Christe redemptor omnium*, line 11; *Inluxit orbi iam dies*, line 22; *O redemptor sume carmen*, line 14; *Optatus votis omnibus*, line 18; *Hymnum canamus gloriae*, line 11; *Fit porta Christi pervia*, stanza 1.

²¹ Text from *Anal. Hymn.*, LI, p. 140.

²² M. Britt, *Hymns of the Breviary and Missal* (New York, 1924), p. 317 et seq.

Hail! Sea-star we name thee,
Ever-maid acclaim thee,
Godès Mother, portal
Up to bliss immortal.

Ave was the token
By the Angel spoken:
Peace on earth it telleth,
Eva's name re-spelleth.

Free the worldly-minded:
Luminate the blinded:
Every ill repressing,
Win us every blessing,

Plead, and play the mother:
He will, and none other,
Born for our salvation,
Heed thy supplication.

Maiden, meek and lowly,
Singularly holy,
Loose the sins that chain us;
Sanctify, constrain us.

Rule our life in pureness;
Smooth our way with sureness.
Jesus: O to eye him,
Like thee, always nigh him!

Father, Son, we bless thee,
Likewise we confess thee,
Holy Spirit, trinal,
Onely, first and final.²³

This beautiful hymn is typical of the early centuries, in that familiar words are present, such as "Mother of God," "gate of heaven," and "*Ave*," the reversed spelling of which reads "*Eva*." Moreover, the Virgin is thought of as the inspiration to a life of purity. A new note, characteristic of the future, is also heard. The mother is implored to use for mortals her great influence with the Son.

One of the striking features of this hymn is the direct address sustained from beginning to end. Fortunatus, it is true, appealed directly to the Virgin in the second part of his hymn in her honor, beginning with the line, *O gloriosa femina*, but this is a single instance from all the poems considered. The direct and personal approach in later hymns is almost universal.

It is difficult to overstate the charm and distinction of *Ave maris stella*. Its opening words suggest that atmosphere of unearthly beauty in which the evening star is seen against the blue depth of its luminous background. As early as the fourth century the name *stella maris* was used as the equivalent of *Mary*, but never had it been employed in hymns until this time.²⁴ Herein is another consideration linking past with

²³ G. R. Woodward, *The Mother of My Lord* (London, 1923), p. 11.

²⁴ O. Bardenhewer, *Der Name Maria* (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1895), p. 88. For a discussion of similarities between epithets for Astarte and the term, *stella maris*, as applied to Mary, consult p. 36 of the above work.

future, for no term thereafter applied to the Virgin has been received with great favor.

Although this paper is, strictly speaking, concerned with hymns which belonged to services other than the mass, the hymnology of the latter cannot be altogether ignored. Toward the close of the period which ended in the ninth century, the mass was enriched by a new form of hymn, called the "sequence." The exact date of its appearance cannot be determined, nor do scholars now agree as to the authorship of important compositions once claimed as the work of individual poets, such as Notker of St. Gall. Setting these vexed questions aside we are, however, face to face with the same type of evidence seen in the office hymns. During the period of origin of the sequence, extant manuscript collections bear witness to the same ways of thinking, so prominent in the older established forms and now transferred to a new medium of religious verse.²⁵

In terms like the above, Christian hymn writers from the fourth to the ninth centuries of our era were wont to think of the Virgin Mother. The period of the founding and expansion of Christianity had created a heritage everywhere familiar throughout the Roman Empire. Barbarian conquerors and Roman inhabitants had been merged into a new race which, in turn, assimilated the old ideas and expressions. Its creative powers had not yet fully matured, but here and there a leader appeared like Alcuin and his colleagues, precursors of that new day which was at hand. In the ninth century men stood like watchers before the dawn.

In spite of the simplicity and dignity of those terms of praise which were applied to the Virgin, some may regard them as meager, in the light of later hymns upon the same subject. If so, it should be recalled that the warmer and richer colors of daybreak had not yet flooded the sky. Saint Bernard had not yet been born. The Cistercian and other orders, whose delight it was to celebrate the glories of the Virgin, had not yet appeared. The later feasts had not yet been established. The Little Hours had not yet been observed. The more elaborate sequences for the Virgin masses had not yet been composed. We miss the exuberant piety which the veneration of

²⁵*Vide Anal. Hymn.*, LIII, for sequences from manuscripts of the tenth century, especially Nos. 12, 15, 18, 22, 25, 26, 27.



the Virgin was yet to call forth. true of art. Émile Mâle, who mediæval art captivate every real the change which takes place in the Virgin in sculpture at the time when were undergoing the development describes the Virgin sculptures but "so serious" (*si grave*).²⁶ No better express the essential quality and penned by the early Latin poets. inarticulate, but intensely devoted true to the thought of their time in medium a fresher and more direct ing than may be found in other The great Christian hymns of all It is inherent in their very nature heritage of thought and devotion, reflect what they behold in forms

²⁶ *L'Art religieux du xii^e Siècle en France*

forth. True of hymns, it is equally
able, whose fascinating accounts of
every reader, has called attention to
place in the representation of the
time when other forms of her praise
development referred to above. He
captures before the twelfth century as
No better word could be found to
quality and character of those praises
poets. They are restrained, perhaps
ly devotional. We have found them
their times, but offering in the poetic
more direct expression of religious feel-
in other forms of religious literature.
ns of all ages have this characteristic.
every nature to reveal the common
evotion, like the face of waters which
in forms of more perfect beauty.

cle en France (Paris, 1922), p. 426.

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